

News Release

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Short-Tailed Albatross Chick Hatches at Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge

A first for short-tailed albatross in recorded history

An important– and hopeful– milestone in the conservation of the endangered short-tailed albatross was recorded today at Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge, part of the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument. A short-tailed albatross hatched on Eastern Island, one of three small flat coral islands that comprise Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge about 1,200 miles northwest of Honolulu. This marks the first confirmed hatching of a short-tailed albatross outside of the islands surrounding Japan in recorded history.

“We are all as excited as new parents,” said Daniel Clark, acting Refuge Manager. “The chick hatched in the middle of a major storm but the parent is doing an excellent job of protecting it so we are guardedly optimistic about its chances for survival.”

Establishing a new nesting colony is one of several important steps needed to continue the rare bird’s recovery because volcanic activity regularly threatens the short-tailed albatross’ main nesting grounds on Torishima Island. The species’ recovery also depends on reducing the threats of contaminants, especially oil contamination at sea and plastic ingestion; reducing bycatch of these seabirds in commercial fisheries; and addressing invasive species conflicts at nesting colonies.

A pair of short-tailed albatross first “met” at Midway Atoll Refuge during the breeding season four years ago (2007-08). During that season, they were observed spending only a little time together. During the second season (2008-09), their time together increased. By the third season (2009-10), they arrived at the Eastern Island breeding colony together and built a nest. This breeding season, on November 16, 2010, an adult short-tailed albatross was observed incubating a freshly laid egg. The pair have been under remote observation since.

The short-tailed albatross, listed as endangered since 1970, is the largest seabird in the North Pacific with a wing span of 7 to 7.5 feet. It is known for the golden, yellow cast on its head and nape; for its large, pink bill with blue tip and black border around the base; and for its pale bluish feet and legs. Its life span is 12 to 45 years. Pairs begin breeding at about seven or eight years of age, and mate for life.

Once thought to be the most abundant albatross species in the North Pacific with a population of more than 5 million adults, short-tailed albatross were hunted for feathers, and harmed in other ways, to near extinction.

By the 20th century, only two colonies remained on remote Japanese islands– Torishima Island in the Philippine Sea and Minami, and Kojima Island near Taiwan in the East China Sea. In 1939, the short-tailed albatross' main breeding grounds on Torishima were buried under 30 to 90 feet of lava after a volcanic eruption. Population numbers plummeted to 10 individuals. Since then, conservation efforts have helped increase the population to approximately 2,400 birds, which forage widely across the temperate/subarctic North Pacific and can be seen in the Gulf of Alaska, along the Aleutian Islands and in the Bering Sea.

Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge – since 2006 part of the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument – has actively planned to host a nesting colony for more than a decade, and this conservation effort seems to be paying off. Short-tailed albatross were rarely seen on Midway Atoll before the effort began. This season marks the pair's first known mating and nesting attempt. Refuge staff and volunteers will continue to monitor the nest daily with the use of a remote video camera.

Barry Stieglitz, Project Leader for the Hawaiian and Pacific Islands National Wildlife Refuge Complex of which Midway Atoll is a part, said of the hatching: “This hatching – significant in and of itself – is really part of two stories. The first is about what the dedicated staff of the Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge were able to accomplish on a shoestring over many, many patient years; slowly drawing these magnificent birds to Eastern Island with recorded calls and decoys. The second story started in 1903 when President Teddy Roosevelt sent the United States Navy to protect the albatross, sea turtles, and monk seals at Midway from poachers. These initial efforts grew into a larger vision to preserve and restore the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands ecosystem. We may not see this story finished in our lifetimes – it will be written over the decades to come, building on the work accomplished in the decades of the past.”

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